

Politics and Schools, Part MCCXXIII



(Guest post by Greg Forster)

Neal [notes](#) the connection between Arne Duncan's now-infamous embrace of Al Sharpton and the president's continuing his new tradition of broadcasting a back-to-school message to America's classrooms, coming up later this month.

Duncan didn't just embrace Sharpton in his personal role as a citizen. He mobilized the U.S. Department of Education to support Sharpton by encouraging employees to attend Sharpton's anti-Glenn-Beck rally.

Whatever you think of Glenn Beck, Sharpton cut his teeth as a professional purveyor of incitement to murder. During the Crown Heights race riots, with blood running in the streets, he [said](#), "if the Jews want to get it on, tell them to pin their yarmulkes back and come over to my house." He had to tone it back after the Freddy's Fashion Mart murders, when people began making connections between Sharpton and the killings that kept following in his wake. But tone it back was all he did; he's never repented.

Duncan spoke at Sharpton's rally and urged his employees to attend.

A department spokesperson lamely tried to evade responsibility by saying "This was a back-to-school event." Really? Here's a sample of Al Sharpton's back-to-school message for America's youth, [courtesy](#) of the *Washington Examiner*:

[Conservatives] think we showed up [to vote for Barack Obama] in 2008 and that we won't show up again. But we know how to sucker-punch, and we're coming out again in 2010!

...and do your homework!

This is obviously intimately connected with the president's decision to make it an annual tradition to use America's government school monopoly to broadcast a message to the nation's children. Other presidents have done so before, though none has made it an annual tradition. But it was equally wrong whoever did it, and this Duncan/Sharpton rally shows why.

Neal is trying too hard when he strains to describe Obama's message to students as "politically charged material." Joanne Jacobs rightly [notes](#), "Last year's speech raised a lot of fuss, culminating in a big fizzle as Obama told students to work hard in school." No doubt this year the president will be equally anodyne.

[**Update:** Neal points out below that it was the accompanying materials sent to schools, not Obama's message itself, that he described as "politically charged." Fair enough! I read his post too quickly. Yet it's worth noting that even those accompanying materials were focused on anointing Obama as a role model rather than pushing an *overtly* political agenda.]

The connection is rather that politics can't be hermetically sealed. The president does have some role to play as the representative of the entire nation. But he is never just that; he is also a politician with an agenda. He will always stand for things that many Americans oppose; that's just the nature of political life. And this president in particular seems to have more of a tendency than most presidents of associating himself with criminals and race-haters.

It doesn't matter what Obama says. In fact, the less political his message, the worse it is. If Obama's message really were "politically charged material," many students would recognize it as such. The more anodyne he is, the more he gets what he really wants – to be anointed as a role model. With all that entails.

It's wrong enough to have a government monopoly on schooling. To have the government monopoly anoint the president as a role model for our children is a hundred times more wrong. It would be wrong even if the president were relatively uncontroversial, because no president can avoid having many associations to which many parents will reasonably object. With this president – well, words just fail.